China Perspectives

2018/1-2 | 2018
New Approaches to the Political Regime Under Xi Jinping

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Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/7888
DOI: 10.4000/chinaperspectives.7888
ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher
Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 June 2018
Number of pages: 107-113
ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference
Nathanel Amar, « “Do you Freestyle?” », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2018/1-2 | 2018, Online since 01 June 2018, connection on 14 November 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/7888 ; DOI : 10.4000/chinaperspectives.7888

"Do you Freestyle?"[1]

The Roots of Censorship in Chinese Hip-hop

NATHANEL AMAR

Chinese hip-hop has recently received extensive coverage in the international media. Dozens of articles, published everywhere from the *BBC*[2] to *l'Express*[3] to *Time*,[4] have attempted to explain the astonishing attempts by the Chinese authorities to censor Chinese rap following the genre's spectacular rise to prominence throughout the country's official media over the last few years. On 19 January 2018, a short dispatch from the Sina agency reported that Gao Changli (高长力), Director of Publicity for the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT), announced that Chinese media were henceforth forbidden to invite guests such as tattooed artists (*wenshen yiren* 纹身艺人) or representatives of hip-hop culture (*xiha wenhua* 嘻哈文化), sub-cultures (*ya wenhua* 亚文化), or "dispirited culture" (*sang wenhua* 丧文化).[5] In addition, guests invited to appear on Chinese media are obliged to follow a strict protocol and never "disagree with Party rules, use vulgar language, or display a low ideological level."[6] So what made the Chinese authorities decide to ban hip-hop from the national airwaves in the space of just a few weeks? Before we trace the origins of these events as reported by Chinese and international media, it is first necessary to retrace the history of hip-hop in China, from its birth in the "underground" to its recent commercial breakthrough, in order to better understand the contradictory methods of censorship employed by the Chinese authorities.

The birth of Chinese hip-hop in the musical "underground"

Like many countercultural movements in China, hip-hop took off during the 1990s thanks to the influx of *dakou* (打口) tapes and CDs onto the black market in major Chinese cities. The term *dakou* (or "saw-gash") refers to unsold discs and cassettes that were sent to China by large Western companies for recycling. To prevent their sale on the black market, companies broke the edge of the CD in order to make it unplayable—oblivious to the fact that CDs play outwards from the centre to the edge, meaning that only the final track was unplayable (De Kloet 2010). In the mid-1990s, these CDs and cassettes were sold in massive quantities on the black market in large Chinese cities, breathing new life into an independent music scene that had been dormant since Tiananmen. The Hong Kongese rap of Lazy Mutha Fucka (LMF), sung in Cantonese, also had an influence on the first mainland hip-hop groups by proving that a Chinese language could be rapped. Although hip-hop was less popular than rock or punk, it nevertheless became an integral part of the underground musical communities of the 1990s. Later on, in the early 2000s, the first Chinese hip-hop records were produced by Scream Records (*Haojiao changpian* 嚎叫唱片), an independent Beijing record label born from the ashes of a punk venue known as Scream Club (*Haojiao julebu* 嚎叫俱乐部). In 2002, Scream Records published *Kung Fu* (*Gongfu* 功夫), the debut album by CMCB (Chinese MC Brothers, *Zhongguo shuochang xiongdi* 中国说唱兄弟), and in 2003 released the album *Serve The People* (*Wei renmin fuwu* 为人民服务) by the international Yin T'sang (*Yincang* 隐藏) collective, most notably featuring MC Webber (*MC Wangbo* MC王波). Before Chinese hip-hop came to be defined by the term 嘻哈 (*xiha*), the groups of the 1990s and 2000s used the expression 说唱 (*shuochang*). Literally translated as "speaking-singing," *shuochang*'s roots lay in an ancient form of sung storytelling, before the practice was co-opted by communist propaganda after the Revolution.[7] The influence of the *shuochang* tradition was clearly visible in the first Beijing rap groups, who used traditional instruments such as the *erhu* in their compositions, as well as a Beijing dialect that closely resembled sung storytelling and the practice of *xiangsheng* (相声), a sub-genre of *shuochang* that typically consists of a comic dialogue between two people.[8] Although rap groups were not especially common in the early 2000s, hip-hop became integrated with other styles of music that were popular in the Chinese alternative scene of that time. In 2001, Scream Records released the debut album of Twisted Machine (*Niuqu de jiqi* 扭曲的机器), who played a hybrid form of metal and hip-hop known as nu-metal. Even Chinese rock icon Cui Jian (崔健) introduced rap numbers into his albums, such as the song "Blue Bone" (*Lanse gutou* 蓝色骨头) on the album *Show Your Colour* (*Gei ni yidian yanse* 给你一点颜色), released in 2005. Meanwhile, punk-rock group Brain Failure (*Nao zhuo* 脑浊) recruited legendary rapper Chuck D from the American group Public Enemy for the song "A Box in the Broken Ball" on their 2009 album *Downtown Production* (*Jinxian erhuan yinei* 仅限二环以内), as well as MC Yan from Hong Kong's LMF on "Ideal of Shinjuku" (*Lixiang de Xinjiekou* 理想的新街口). Even pop music borrowed from hip-hop on certain songs, with

1. "你有freestyle吗?"
2. "China's Fledgling Hip-Hop Culture Faces Official Crackdown," *BBC News*, 24 January 2018, http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-china-blog-42800032 (accessed on 21 February 2018).
3. "En Chine, l'avenir incertain du hip-hop" (Hip-hop's uncertain future in China), *L'Express*, 22 January 2018, https://www.lexpress.fr/culture/musique/en-chine-l-avenir-incertain-du-hip-hop_1978238.html (accessed on 21 February 2018).
4. Casey Quackenbush and Aria Hangyu Chen, "'Tasteless, Vulgar and Obscene.' China Just Banned Hip-Hop Culture and Tattoos From Television," *Time*, 22 January 2018, http://time.com/5112061/china-hip-hop-ban-tattoos-television/ (accessed on 21 February 2018).
5. "Dispirited culture" was singled out on 17 August 2017 by the *People's Daily*. See Zeng Yuli, "Turn Off, Drop Out: Why Young Chinese Are Abandoning Ambition," *Sixth Tone*, 27 June 2017, http://www.sixthtone.com/news/1000407/turn-off%2C-drop-out-why-young-chinese-are-abandoning-ambition (accessed on 21 February 2018).
6. "总局提出节目嘉宾标准:格调低纹身嘻哈文化不用"(*Zongju tichu jiemu jiabin biaozhun: ge tiaodi wenshen xiha wenhua buyong*, The central office announces behavioural standards for guests: no more hip-hop or tattoos), 新浪娱乐 (*Sinlang Yule*, Sina), 19 January 2018, http://ent.sina.com.cn/tv/zy/2018-01-19/doc-ifyquptv7935320.shtml (accessed on 21 February 2018).
7. Tom Ireland, "Hip-Hop's Ancient Predecessor: Shuochang," *The World of Chinese*, 7 December 2011, http://www.theworldofchinese.com/2011/07/hip-hops-ancient-predecessor-shuochang/ (accessed on 21 February 2018).
8. This is demonstrated in Yin T'sang's song "In Beijing" (*Zai Beijing* 在北京), one of Chinese rap's earliest hits. https://youtu.be/Qh6lJWfYyTo (accessed on 21 February 2018).

Hong Kong Cantopop and Taiwanese Mandapop stars such as Edison Chen and Jay Chou going so far as to describe themselves as rappers. One issue of the music magazine published by the Modern Sky record label (*Modeng Tiankong* 摩登天空) was dedicated to Chinese rap, and featured a long interview with Edison Chen alongside more established rappers like MC Webber. [9]

Meanwhile, hip-hop culture also developed in the form of rap "battles" that were held during the early 2000s in a number of "underground" bars in Shanghai and Beijing. American rapper MC Showtyme, who came to Shanghai in the late 1990s, organised the first battles in 2001, initially in Shanghai and then in Beijing. Backed by a predetermined beat, two rappers are given an allotted time to confront each other, taking turns to improvise "freestyle" lyrics while the audience decides which rapper is the winner. [10] The "Iron Mic" contests (*Gangtie maike* 钢铁麦克) soon became popular—especially following the success of *8 Mile*, an American film released in 2003 starring rapper Eminem—and spawned a new generation of rappers such as Beijing's MC Dawei (MC大卫), Urumqi's MC Majun (MC马俊), and In3 (*Yin san'er* 阴三儿) and Nasty Ray, both hailing from the Chinese capital. Stepping away from the usual clichés propounded by hip-hop, these groups addressed social topics and rapped about their frustration with authority, be it official, parental, or educational. In3's abrasive lyrics expressed the dissatisfaction of many young Chinese city-dwellers—for example in the song "Good Morning, Teacher" (*Laoshi nihao* 老师你好), a scathing critique of the academic institution taken from their self-produced 2008 album *Unknown Artist* (*Weizhi yishujia* 未知艺术家) that epitomised this new generation of rappers:

> 没收我的东西我他妈都不要了
> Those things you confiscated from me, I don't fucking need them
> 跟别的都没事. 我跟你只有仇恨
> It's nothing to do with the others. I only feel hate for you
> 你扔了我的书包这事儿我永远记得
> You threw away my book bag, I'll never forget that
> 对你有偏见是因为我没换过座位
> And if I'm prejudiced against you it's because I never changed seats
> 一年四季挨着垃圾桶说话能不脏么
> All year long, sat next to the trash can, it's no wonder I'm vulgar
> 黑板上的裂缝就是我砸得
> The crack in the blackboard, it was me who did that
> 你喝的每口水里他妈都有我的吐沫
> And every time you sip your cup you drink my fucking saliva

In3 would pay dearly for embodying the rebellious spirit of Chinese rap. On 10 August 2015, *People's Daily* announced that the Chinese Ministry of Culture had put 120 songs onto a blacklist (*hei mingdan* 黑名单). These 120 songs were withdrawn from all musical distribution platforms, and the artists involved were banned from performing in public. [11] The Ministry justified this censorship by claiming that the songs promoted "obscenity, violence, and crime, and jeopardised morality." [12] Rap groups figured heavily on the blacklist: of all the songs listed, In3 ranked in first place with 17 censored songs—"Good Morning, Teacher" came in first place, followed by the song "Beijing Evening News" (*Beijing Wanbao* 北京晚报), doubtless for its controversial line, "Some people sleep in underpasses, while others eat out on government expenses" (*youren shui dixia tongdao, youren gongkuan chihe guojia ji baoxiao*, 有人睡地下通道, 有人公款吃喝国家给报销). The list also includes Beijing hip-hop group Xinjiekou Crew (*Xinjiekou zuhe* 新街口组合) as well as a large number of Taiwanese rappers such as Chang Csun, Stanley Huang, and especially MC Hotdog for his song "Fuck Your Mother" (*Cao ni ma ge bi* 操你妈个逼). In the 1990s, Geremie Barmé had already noted that censorship of cultural products had the knock-on effect of fuelling a certain appetite abroad for what he termed "bankable dissent" (Barmé 1999: 188). The 2015 blacklist produced the same effect, but within China itself: a large number of Chinese web users downloaded the songs by In3 that featured on the list, proceeding sarcastically to thank the censorship department for introducing them to underground rap. [13] In September 2015, the members of In3 were arrested by Beijing police after returning from a concert that had been held in Kunming. They were detained and released five days later, with no charges made against them. [14] According to the foreign press, the arrests of rappers and censorship of certain hip-hop groups was evidence that Xi Jinping had regained control of the Chinese cultural sphere in 2015, following a relatively lax period up until 2012 under the leadership of Hu Jintao. Indeed, after coming to power, Xi Jinping ordered intellectuals and artists to communicate the "positive energy" of socialist values, [15] while rap appears to contradict these "values" at every turn, given its propensity for vulgarity and tackling social issues. The Party's focus on hip-hop, and not on punk, for example, is most likely due to its growing popularity among Chinese youth.

The growing popularity and exposure of hip-hop and Sichuanese "trap" music

After underground hip-hop emerged in the 2000s, chiefly in Beijing and Shanghai, a new form of Chinese rap, younger and more suited to social media, found itself thrust into the limelight. By some margin, the best-known hip-hop movement is now Sichuanese "trap," a sub-genre that celebrates the region's unique pronunciation and is promoted by music videos with comparatively high production values. [16] Trap is a genre that stems from rap, and was born in the southern states of America in the early 2000s. It is distinguished by a slower rhythm and lyrics that discuss drug dealing (the term comes from "trap houses," houses used by dealers to produce and distribute drugs). One well-known Sichuanese trap group is the Higher Brothers (*Hai'er xiongdi* 海尔兄弟) from Chengdu, their moniker an opiated

9. 何其原 (He Qiyuan), "直击陈冠希审核魔鬼我都喜欢, 也不知更喜欢哪一个" (*Zhiji Chen Guanxi shenhe mogui wo dou xihuan, ye bu zhi geng xihuan na yige*, Facing Edison Chen god and the devil I like them both), 摩登空天 (Modern Sky), Vol. 13, 2017, 52-83.
10. See the documentary *Story of Iron Mic* by Billy Starman (2017), https://youtu.be/-FrigB3W4eY (accessed on 21 February 2018).
11. 黄维 (Huang Wei), "文化部首次公布120首网络音乐产品黑名单 将依法查处" (*Wenhuabu shouci gongbu 120 shou wangluo yinyue chanpin heimingdan jiang yifa chachu*, The Ministry of Culture has published online a blacklist of 120 songs which are due to be examined before the law), 人民日报 (*People's Daily*), 10 August 2015, http://culture.people.com.cn/n/2015/0810/c87423-27439050.html (accessed on 21 February 2018).
12. *Ibid.*
13. Tiffany Ap, "China's Online Ban Against 'Fart' and 119 other 'Immoral' Songs," *CNN*, 12 August 2015, https://edition.cnn.com/2015/08/12/asia/china-song-ban/index.html (accessed on 21 February 2018).
14. Jamie Fullerton, "China's Hip-hop Stars Feel the Heat of Xi Jinping's Battle to Control Culture," *The Guardian*, 5 February 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/05/chinas-hip-hop-stars-feel-the-heat-of-xi-jinpings-battle-to-control-culture (accessed on 21 February 2018).
15. Tom Phillips, "Publishers Under Pressure as China's Censors Reach for Red Pen," *The Guardian*, 13 November 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/13/china-censorship-xi-jinping-authors-publishers (accessed on 21 February 2018).
16. Rob Schmitz, "Chengdu Emerges as a New Home for Chinese Hip-Hop," *NPR Music*, 1 February 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/02/01/576819311/chengdu-emerges-as-a-new-home-for-chinese-hip-hop (accessed on 21 February 2018).

pun on the Chinese electrical appliance brand Haier. Active within the Sichuanese hip-hop scene since the early 2010s, Higher Brothers have successfully exported their sound far beyond the confines of Chinese rap, collaborating with foreign artists such as Korea's Keith Ape on the song "WeChat" (*Weixin* 微信) and with American rapper Ski Mask The Slump God on the song "Flo Rida." Ingenious videos such as "WeChat" [17] and "Made in China" [18] have allowed Higher Brothers to build a reputation outside China and, in February 2018, to travel to the United States for a sold-out tour entitled "Journey to the West," while numerous press articles have reported on their international popularity. [19] Higher Brothers' songs, performed partly in Mandarin and partly in Sichuanese, humorously describe the vagaries of daily life for young people in China, naturally via the WeChat app, but also the illegal taxis (*heiche* 黑车) of Chengdu in "Black Cab," [20] the 7-Eleven chain of convenience stores in "7-11," [21] and China's industrial hegemony in "Made in China." According to some journalists, the fact that Higher Brothers have not (yet) been censored proves that their songs are inoffensive, and on the contrary may even be contributing to China's cultural expansion around the globe. [22] Such criticism does not appear to take into account the underground organisational work that Higher Brothers have carried out within the Sichuanese rap scene, especially as part of the CDC collective (Chengdu Rap House, *Shuochang huiguan* 说唱会馆) that they helped to create.

GAI (whose real name is Zhou Yan 周延), a rapper from Chongqing, has also gained notoriety through a series of trap videos where he appears naked from the waist up, displaying his numerous tattoos in the classic international tradition of "gangsta" rap. In 2015 he released his song "Gangsta" (*Chao shehui* 超社会), where he describes his involvement with the local mafia, surrounding himself with other bare-chested friends who wave knives at the camera.

哎呀 前段时间拿菜刀剥了个人
Not long ago I took a knife to stab a guy
喊我赔医药费
He told me to pay his medical bills
我说我认帐
I said, sure, I'll do it
但是老子不给 老子不给
But I don't give a shit, I don't give a shit

In interviews, GAI acknowledges that he writes songs based on his own experience:

> Everything I talk about has really happened. At 13 I got into a brawl, I was an outcast from society. [23]

But he links his involvement with the Chinese mafia to greater problems in Chinese society as a whole:

> The gap between rich and poor in China is getting wider and wider. In this society there are people who have nothing to eat. That's why gangsters exist. [24]

Like many other representatives of Chinese rap, GAI has taken China's "secret societies" (*hei shehui* 黑社会) as a template for creating Chinese gangsta rap, thereby brushing aside criticism that Chinese rap is merely a pale imitation of American hip-hop. [25] The affiliation with "secret societies" is clearly stated, particularly in GAI's song "The Flow of Jiang-Hu" (*Jianghu liu* 江湖流), performed in collaboration with Changsha rapper C-Block. [26]

In recent years another Chengdu rapper, Fat Shady (*Xie Di* 谢帝), has acquired a certain notoriety. Speaking in a Sichuanese dialect, Fat Shady had his moment of glory in 2014, when he took part in the popular TV talent show "Sing My Song" (*Zhongguo hao gequ* 中国好歌曲), broadcast on CCTV-3, by performing his best known song, "I'm Not Working Tomorrow" (*Mingtian bu shangban* 明天不上班). [27] Fat Shady was one of the first rappers to appear on a mainstream television show, helping to take hip-hop to a wider audience. He also became well known to a broader Western audience with his song "Stupid Foreigner" (*Gua laowai* 瓜老外), which attacks the arrogance of expatriates in China. A few foreign media outlets with bases in China wasted no time in accusing Fat Shady of racism, [28] while some members of the Chinese public were only too happy that a rapper had finally taken aim at the privileges of certain expatriates in China.

外国的朋友来中国
Our foreign friends who come to China
都晓得我们有票儿
They all know we've got money
都晓得我们有妹儿
They all know we've got girls
外国的朋友啥子人都有
Foreigners of all types
为赚钱啥子都会一点儿
They'll do anything for money
长得高的都是模特儿
The tall ones become models
今天是英语老师耶
Today you're an English teacher
明天是年轻的企业家耶
Tomorrow, a young entrepreneur

17. The YouTube video for "WeChat" (not viewable in China) has received 5.2 million views: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LsQCNtCH2sc (accessed on 21 February 2018).
18. Meanwhile, the video for "Made In China" has amassed 8.8 million YouTube views: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rILKm-DC06A (accessed on 21 February 2018).
19. Lauren Teixeira, "Higher Brothers Are Chinese Hip-Hop's Greatest Hope," *Noisey*, 28 January 2018, https://noisey.vice.com/en_us/article/xw4bkn/higher-brothers-profile-chinese-hip-hop (accessed on 21 February 2018).
20. Higher Brothers, "Black Cab": https://youtu.be/YfZPz7okidc (accessed on 21 February 2018).
21. Higher Brothers, "7-11": https://youtu.be/GOF9E2WirfE (accessed on 21 February 2018).
22. Fei Lu, "Why Higher Brothers Wasn't Censored By China's Government," *The Paper*, 23 January 2018, http://www.papermag.com/higher-brothers-china-censorship-2528064793.html (accessed on 21 February 2018).
23. "能做商业，谁他妈愿意做地下：和重庆说唱歌手 GAI 一起"超社会" (*Neng zuo shangye, shei tama yuanyi zuo dixia: he Chongqing shuochang geshou GAI yiqi 'Chao shehui,'* If you could make money, who the fuck would want to be underground?: We get gangsta with Chongqing rapper GAI), *Noisey*, 15 October 2015, http://noisey.vice.cn/read/interview-with-rappeur-gai (accessed on 21 February 2018).
24. *Ibidem.*
25. See "从水浒到嘻哈：说唱文化与中国江湖" (*Cong Shuihu dao xiha: shuochang wenhua yu Zhongguo jianghu*, From water's edge to hip-hop: Rap culture and China's 'Jianghu'), 界面文化 (*Jiemian Wenhua*), 2 September 2017, http://www.sohu.com/a/169030139_99897611 (accessed on 21 February 2018).
26. Online: https://youtu.be/i7a8vwx3BPQ (accessed on 21 February 2018).
27. See the online video of his CCTV-3 performance: https://youtu.be/KugiopC40ac (accessed on 21 February 2018)
28. Alex Linder, "'Stupid *laowai*': Chengdu Rapper Comes out with Incredibly Racist Diss Track Against Foreigners," *Shanghaiist*, 14 August 2017, http://shanghaiist.com/2017/08/14/stupid-laowai.php (accessed on 21 February 2018).

后天又变成了啥子?
What you gonna be, the day after that?
你想去装过来给老子擦车?
You want to come and wash my car?

Fat Shady's 2014 appearance on "Sing My Song" may have helped to introduce rap to a wider audience, but Chinese television created the first programme to be entirely dedicated to the genre when Chinese online video company iQiyi broadcast the first season of "The Rap of China" (*Zhongguo you xiha* 中国有嘻哈) in June 2017. The show was produced by Taiwanese singers Will Pan and Cheng Chenyue, Sino-Canadian pop star Kris Wu, and Taiwanese rapper MC Hotdog. Two years previously, MC Hotdog had been included on the Ministry of Culture's blacklist, a clear demonstration of the contradictory ways in which censorship is applied, taking aim at an ever-changing range of targets according to circumstance. "The Rap of China" was an immense success with the public, racking up more than 1.3 billion views in the course of its first season, which awarded joint first place to GAI and PG One, the latter being a rapper from Harbin and member of the HHH (*Hua Hong Hui* 红花会) Collective. [29] However, web users lambasted the show, ridiculing the pop star Kris Wu, who acted as one of the judges on the TV talent show. They called his rap prowess into question, mocking his habit of asking contestants whether they could "freestyle" (*Ni you* freestyle *ma?* 你有freestyle吗 ?) via a series of memes shared on Chinese social media. [30] The media in China and the West saw the show's success as proof that the hitherto underground musical genre had finally emerged as a popular phenomenon.

This was a golden age for Chinese rap, especially since the Communist Party seemed to have accepted the culture and planned on using it for its own propagandist ends. The songs of Chengdu rap group CD Rev (*Tianfu shibian* 天府事变) were used to promote approved Party values, tinged with overtones of nationalism. Their English-language song "The Force of Red" sets out the group's nationalist agenda:

> Fuck DPP [the Taiwanese Democratic Party], Fuck Tsai-Ing Wen [President of Taiwan], Y'all bitches ready for this shit? Taiwan ain't a country! Bitch, at most a county, Please don't even think about it (...). There's only one China, HK, Taipei, They are my fellas.

Although the members of CD Rev are not members of the Communist Party, their videos are produced and directed by the Communist Youth League's in-house production team. Many foreign media outlets have reported on the subject, seeing CD Rev as a perfect example of political co-opting, omitting to mention the many criticisms levelled by Chinese rappers at CD Rev, whom they consider mediocre, and who do not take part in "The Rap of China." [31]

PG One and GAI: The birth of a scandal

Hip-hop's growing popularity within China's youth culture could not go unnoticed. Just as Chinese rock music, extremely popular in the 1980s, became marginalised by censorship after 1989, the Communist Party authorities took the sudden and unexpected decision in January 2018 to prohibit television stations from featuring any representatives of hip-hop culture in their shows. This decision was implemented after an intensive propaganda campaign led by the Communist Youth League in early January 2018. On 4 January at 3:26 p.m., the Youth League posted a message on the Weibo social network accusing PG One, also known as Wang Hao (王昊) and co-winner of "The Rap of China," of encouraging young people to take drugs and humiliate women in one of his early songs, "Christmas Eve" (*Shengdan ye* 圣诞夜), also stating that "public figures on the Internet should act as positive role models and set a good example to our country's adolescents." [32] The Communist Youth League's statement was apparently made following online complaints about PG One, an increasingly popular means of calling out artists, either because they fail to respect the values approved by the authorities, or through simple opportunism. [33] PG One had already been the subject of online rumours in December accusing him of having an extra-marital relationship with an actress. [34] The Youth League's accusation, which was shared more than 20,000 times and received more than 55,000 comments, was accompanied by a screen-grab of the song concerned, which makes reference to "the pure stuff" (*Chunbaise de fenmo* 纯白色的粉末, literally "pure white powder," or what Booba would call "0.9"):

纯白色的粉末在板上走
The pure stuff is spread out on the floor
和homie roll起 怕的都去休息
I'm rolling with my homies, I'm worried they're all going to fall asleep
跟我们一起来到酒吧前
Before we all hit the bar together
我的homie还没有发言
My homies ain't said nothing yet
一个不要脸的bitch开始手发闲
A brazen bitch gives me manual pleasure
结果告诉我她九八年
She tells me she was born in '98
想让我办了她
She wants me to go to work on her
她装作自己已抽醉
She pretends she's already wasted, out of her head
还是算了吧算了吧站在那看着她
But it ain't worth it, ain't worth it, I'll just stay here and watch her
她却说你所有的歌我全都会
She tells me she knows all my songs

29. Meng Yaping, "'The Rap of China' Turns Underground Music into Mainstream Hits," *CGTN*, 23 July 2017, https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d4d444e3567444e/share_p.html (accessed on 21 February 2018).
30. Zhang Xingjian, "Chinese Pop Star's Freestyle Becomes Instant Buzzword," *China Daily*, 7 July 2017, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/life/2017-07/07/content_30030625_2.htm (accessed on 21 February 2018).
31. For example Tom Phillips, "Chinese Officials Hire Gangsta Rappers to Boost China's Image Abroad," *The Guardian*, 30 June 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/30/chinese-officials-hire-gangsta-rappeurs-to-boost-chinas-image-abroad ; Javier C. Hernández, "Propaganda With a Millennial Twist Pops Up in China," *The New York Times*, 31 December 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/31/world/asia/china-propaganda-communist-party-millennials.html (accessed on 21 February 2018).
32. The Communist Youth League's original message in Chinese can be read here: https://www.weibo.com/3937348351/FCO4auXuV?from=page_1001063937348351_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1518432363965 (accessed on 21 February 2018).
33. In December 2017, the punk band SMZB and metal band Voodoo Kungfu had already been the target of similar criticism. See Nathanel Amar, "Piece of Garbage Complains to China's Bureau of Culture Regarding Punk Legends SMZB," *Unite Asia*, 19 January 2018, https://uniteasia.org/piece-garbage-complains-chinas-bureau-culture-regarding-punk-legends-smzb/ (accessed on 21 February 2018).
34. "Why Hip-Hop Scares the Chinese Communist Party," *The Economist*, 25 January 2018, https://www.economist.com/news/china/21735605-criticised-his-coarse-lyrics-rappeur-china-blames-influence-black-music-why-hip-hop (accessed on 21 February 2018).

因为想法从不封建
Because I ain't some feudal lord
今天可以到我家里一边看雪一边party
Today we can go to my place, take some powder and have some fun
眼睛里只有Versace变成我手里的芭比
They only have eyes for Versace, when they're with me they all turn into Barbie
嘴里塞满money 眼神麻痹坐上玛莎拉蒂
With their mouths full of money, bug-eyed, they climb in my Maserati
Bitch都来我的家里住
Bitches, you should all come live with me
全部撅起屁股cos圣诞小麋鹿
Show me your booty, dressed up like a reindeer
就骑在她肩上把燃料抽精光唱铃儿响叮当
I climb on top of them and drain my tank, while singing Jingle Bells

The same day at 4:11 p.m., less than an hour after the Youth League's accusation was made, PG One posted a statement in which he expressed regret for his actions. [35] In the statement, which was shared more than 180,000 times and received nearly 900,000 comments, PG One apologised for the lyrics of the song that he released early in his career, and reassured the public that "having become more mature, I will promote a sense of social responsibility and become a better role model to my fans." But it was his explanation of how he discovered hip-hop that provoked controversy, when he claimed that his misplaced understanding of rap stemmed from "the deep-rooted influence of black music" (*heiren yinyue* 黑人音乐). This excuse, which cast hip-hop in a racialised and culturalist light, drew numerous criticisms from Chinese web users, but was nevertheless echoed by the official press. The PG One "scandal," opportunely exploited by the Communist Youth League, had the immediate effect of getting all of PG One's songs removed from every platform in China. But the following week, the official censors also came down heavily on GAI, the other winner of "The Rap of China": His appearance on the show "I Am a Singer" (*Wo shi geshou* 我是歌手), a highly popular reality show on Hunan TV, was cancelled, while the footage of his appearance on the first episode, on January 12th, was removed from all online video sites. [36] However, GAI had given the Chinese authorities a guarantee of good behaviour the previous December in an appearance on the CCTV-3 show "I Want to Go to the Spring Gala" (*Wo yao shang chunwan* 我要上春晚), where he sang "Long Live Our Motherland" (*Zhuguo wansui* 祖国万岁) for the audience. This clearly shows how indiscriminately censorship is applied, but also reveals its inconsistencies—such as the banning of MC Hotdog from Chinese airwaves in 2015, followed by his reappearance on a TV programme in 2017.

Official outrage on social media to the censorship of "hip-hop culture"

But it was the scale and speed at which hip-hop was censored that was unexpected. As previously mentioned, on 19 January 2018, a Sina press dispatch reported that the SAPPRFT had sent an advisory notice to Chinese TV stations stating that they should no longer allow representatives of hip-hop culture or tattooed persons to appear [37] in the wake of the PG One scandal. The fact that this decree included tattoos should come as no surprise, as tattoos feature prominently in hip-hop culture, and rappers, be they from China or anywhere else, proudly wear their allegiance to the subculture on their bodies. The Chinese authorities' attitude toward the practice of tattooing is a long and complex one: indeed, until 2011 it was impossible for anyone with tattoos to join the Chinese army. [38] Traditionally, tattoos were considered a mark of shame, forbidden by Confucianism, which considered them an affront to filial piety (Reed 2000), but they were also associated with the "barbarians" who were not part of the Han elite (Lei 2009) and "secret societies" (*hei shehui* 黑社会) involved in the *jianghu* space (Boretz 2011). The SAPPRFT's directive therefore grouped together a variety of different practices that appeared to have a negative influence on Chinese youth. But if we look more closely at the various opinions that were expressed in the Chinese media before the SAPPRFT made its recommendations, it is possible to discern a number of standpoints, not all of which favour such a blunt form of censorship. *Global Times*, an English-language nationalist paper, followed at length the developments in Chinese hip-hop, both before and after the PG One scandal.

Before any scandal had been provoked by PG One's lyrics, *Global Times* had reported on the recent surge in hip-hop's popularity, covering the rapper Sun Bayi (孙八一), who took part in "The Rap of China," and the Higher Brothers. [39] On 4 January 2018, *Global Times* reported on the controversy between the Communist Youth League and PG One, accusing the rapper of setting a poor example for Chinese youth. [40] On 8 January 2018, ten days after the SAPPRFT is alleged to have sent out its directives on hip-hop, *Global Times* published two comparatively divergent opinions on the matter. The first, taking a somewhat Maoist tone, told rappers to "repent" and "purify" their songs. [41] In the article, *Global Times* castigated PG One, while celebrating the notion of "rap with Chinese qualities," citing the group CD Rev as a good example (while neglecting to mention the tone of their sexist attack on Tsai Ing-wen—vulgarity apparently being permissible when aimed at enemies of the Party) as well as Sun Bayi, who in the wake of the controversy released a song quoting extracts from the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. The second opinion piece published that day was far less nuanced, and questioned whether a Chinese style of hip-hop could even exist. [42] This latter article claimed that since rap was born in the United States within the African-American community, it could not be applied to the situation in China, where racism and social discrimination did not occur, and in addition, that China had no comparable phenomenon to "gangsta" culture. This culturalist attitude to rap subculture, which also

35. See PG One's message posted on Weibo: https://www.weibo.com/1875781361/FCOmqdspA?from=page_1005051875781361_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment (accessed on 21 February 2018).
36. Jiayun Feng, "Report: China to Ban Tattoos and 'Hip-hop Culture' from TV Shows," *Sup China*, 19 January 2018, http://supchina.com/2018/01/19/china-bans-tattoos-and-hip-hop-culture-from-tv-shows/ (accessed on 21 February 2018).
37. The copy of the SAPPRFT's directives has not been confirmed by the organisation, but they are cited in "总局提出节目嘉宾标准:格调低纹身嘻哈文化不用," *op. cit.*, http://ent.sina.com.cn/tv/zy/2018-01-19/doc-ifyquptv7935320.shtml (accessed on 21 February 2018).
38. Michael Wines, "Loosening Rules, China Allows Facial and Neck Tattoos to Join Army," *The New York Times*, 2 November 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/03/world/asia/china-loosening-rules-lets-tattoos-into-army.html (accessed on 21 February 2018).
39. "The Rise of Chinese Hip-Hop: From Underground to Mainstream," *Global Times*, 18 December 2017, http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1080811.shtml (accessed on 21 February 2018).
40. "Chinese Rapper Apologizes for Lewd Lyrics, Blames 'Black Music'," *Global Times*, 4 January 2018 http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1083357.shtml (accessed on 21 February 2018).
41. Zhang Yiqian, "China's Patriotic Hip-Hop Quickly Gains Steam as Rappers Repent Past Deviations," *Global Times*, 8 January 2018, http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1083843.shtml (accessed on 21 February 2018).
42. Ai Jun, "Scandal Shows Hip-Hop Cannot Thrive in China," *Global Times*, 8 January 2018, http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1083903.shtml (accessed on 21 February 2018).

displayed a profound ignorance of Chinese society, would in future serve as the pretext for the ban on hip-hop in China. While the first article explored the possibility of a uniquely Chinese style of rap music, taking CD Rev and Sun Bayi as its template, the second denied that hip-hop had any relevance on Chinese soil. On 9 January 2018, another article, which once again reported on the growing popularity of rap, [43] attempted to reconcile these two viewpoints, stating that "even though hip-hop is a product of African-American culture, that doesn't mean it can't talk about people's experiences in China," simultaneously reprimanding PG One and GAI, while praising Duo Li Gang (多力岗) and Su Han (宿涵), who posted online a song produced by Tsinghua University entitled "Tsinghua Tao" (*Shui mu dao* 水木道). [44] On 18 January 2018, *Global Times* announced that GAI would not be taking part in the next episode of the talent show "I Am a Singer," [45] and this was confirmed on 21 January by another article announcing broader censorship of hip-hop in the Chinese media, adding that female rapper VaVa, another contestant on "The Rap of China," had been hastily cut from the edit of a show called "Happy Camp" (*Kuaile dabenying* 快乐大本营), broadcast on Hunan TV. [46] Although we regrettably cannot know the decision-making process that led to hip-hop's disappearance from the Chinese airwaves after 19 January 2018, an analysis of the viewpoints put forth by the Chinese official press prior to the SAPPRFT's alleged directives would appear to suggest that a range of opinions coexisted among the official authorities, especially regarding certain officially sanctioned rap groups—CD Rev, produced by the Communist Youth League, or Sun Bayi—but the growing popularity of "deviant" groups, coupled with the vast quantities of criticism and mockery from web users aimed at "red" rappers, must have caught the authorities off-guard, leading them to adopt more drastic, unilateral measures.

After the removal in January of rappers from Chinese public television, China's internet has also witnessed new forms of censorship, the most recent of which affects the country's most popular live-streaming sites. In fastidious obedience to the SAPPRFT's alleged directives, the site YY.com has banned the live broadcasting of rap in any form, but also of any tattooed individuals, in order to comply with its new site regulations, published on 26 January 2018. [47] The latest victim goes by the name "*hanmai*" (喊麦), which translates as "screaming into the microphone," a hip-hop sub-genre that developed in north-west China, where a web user sings live over a basic beat. Seventy-seven songs were removed from the site, and some web users, such as the *hanmai* star MC Tianyou (MC 天佑), were forced to change their names, since the term "MC" (Master of Ceremony) was reserved exclusively for rappers. [48] Even though *hanmai* is a much-derided genre within the Chinese hip-hop world, widely considered to be a "low quality" rural variant of rap, online video sharing platforms nevertheless took swift action, banning a musical style that could be considered similar to hip-hop and thereby avoiding any potential intervention by the official censorship authorities.

Conclusion

By all accounts, Chinese hip-hop appears to be on a trajectory towards popular recognition, but also towards co-opting by the Chinese authorities. From its underground beginnings, hip-hop developed on the margins of Chinese society throughout the 1990s and 2000s before gaining notoriety thanks to the participation of certain rappers in popular TV talent shows. The most controversial rappers—such as GAI—also began to give guarantees of good behaviour to the authorities, while certain rap groups—heavily criticised by their peers—were only too happy to adopt a stance in line with that of the Party. The effect of censorship has been to bring hip-hop back into the Chinese cultural conversation, and also to demonstrate that no style of music, however popular, is exempt from toeing the Party line. Moreover, targeting hip-hop at a time when its popularity is expanding prompts other cultural producers to bear in mind Xi Jinping's directive that the cultural industries should communicate "positive energy." [49] Further afield, since hip-hop culture is in many respects inherently subversive, it has also caused controversy in other political contexts: for example, in France in 1997, when rappers from the group NTM were given a two-month suspended prison sentence for targeting the police with aggressive remarks (Laroche 2016), or in February 2018, when rapper Sofiane was given a four-month suspended sentence for shooting a music video that blocked traffic on a highway. [50] Scandals like these provide us with a different perspective on subcultures in China, as well as helping us to reassess the notion of applying "Chinese qualities" to imported cultural forms, as suggested by the articles in *Global Times*. Accusations of "co-opting" or "cultural appropriation" are nothing new, since identical charges were levelled at hip-hop in Japan in the 1990s, as Ian Condry reminds us. [51] Since then, hip-hop has established a durable presence in Japan, where it is now one of the most popular forms of music, following a long time in the underground where it acquired a subversive reputation. Nevertheless, the pre-eminence of the Chinese Communist Party seems to have slowed hip-hop's rise to mass popularity—though for how long?—and hip-hop has been forced to return to its underground roots in order to survive. Even so, GAI's recent unexpected return through the release of his new music video "Endless Flow" (*Changhe* 长河), [52] to

43. Huang Tingting, "Once-Marginalized Hip-Hop Culture is Becoming One of China's Hottest Trends," *Global Times*, 9 January 2018, http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1084014.shtml (accessed on 21 February 2018).
44. The *Global Times* pronounced the song a "hit" despite attracting views in only the tens of thousands on the Chinese internet. It can be watched on YouTube: https://youtu.be/zpb6uKQDK1s (accessed on 21 February 2018).
45. "Chinese Rapper GAI Removed From Singing Show 'Singer': Reports," *Global Times*, 18 January 2018, http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1085543.shtml (accessed on 21 February 2018).
46. "Hip-hop's Prospects in China Seem Dim after Chinese Rappers Removed from TV Shows," *Global Times*, 21 January 2018, http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1085836.shtml (accessed on 21 February 2018).
47. "77首喊麦歌曲被禁，MC天佑阿哲被迫改名，1000余名主播被封，喊麦将步嘻哈后尘?" (*77 shou hanmai gequ bei jin, MC Tianyou A Zhe beipo gaiming, 1000 yu ming zhubo bei feng, hanmai jiang bu xiha houchen*, With 77 *hanmai* songs banned, MC Tianyou forced to change his name and 1,000 users deleted, will *hanmai* suffer the same fate as hip-hop?), 网络大电影 (*Wangluo da dianying*), 27 January 2018, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/z86ZkxQF8IuqDX1YjpCseQ (accessed on 21 February 2018).
48. Fan Shuhong, "77 Songs Banned on YY.com With New Regulations," *RadiiChina*, 2 February 2018, https://radiichina.com/77-songs-banned-on-yy-com-with-new-regulations/ ; Kenrick Davis, "China's Hip-Hop Haters Turn Their Ire to 'Hanmai'," *Sixth Tone*, 30 January 2018, http://www.sixthtone.com/news/1001631/chinas-hip-hop-haters-turn-their-ire-to-hanmai (accessed on 21 February 2018).
49. An Baijie, "Xi Urges Artists to Focus on the People," *China Daily*, 28 September 2017, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-09/28/content_32580095.htm (accessed on 21 February 2018).
50. "Le rappeur Sofiane condamné à quatre mois de prison avec sursis pour un clip sur l'autoroute" (Rapper Sofiane given a four-month suspended prison sentence for shooting a video on the motorway), *Le Monde*, 5 February 2018, http://www.lemonde.fr/police-justice/article/2018/02/05/le-rappeur-sofiane-condamne-a-quatre-mois-de-prison-avec-sursis-pour-un-clip-sur-l-autoroute_5252183_1653578.html (accessed on 23 February 2018).
51. "Up until the mid-1990s, people who worked in the entertainment world pointed to hip-hop's rootedness in African American communities as a reason to doubt its possible takeoff in Japan, where different understandings of race, language, and social class prevail." (Condry 2006: 11-12).
52. https://youtu.be/t9_jaIsuWFc (accessed on 9 April 2018).

promote the Chongqing liquor Jiang Xiaobai (江小白), tends to show that Chinese rappers have not yet said their last word. (53)

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53. Fan Shuhong, "GAI Returns with 'Endless Flow' After Being Banned from Chinese TV," *RadiiChina*, 9 March 2018, https://radiichina.com/gai-returns-with-endless-flow-after-being-banned-from-chinese-tv/ (accessed on 9 April 2018).

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